

Interviewee: Gerald Wakefield

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor

Date of interview: 20 July 2004

Location: sitting room at Dassel Nursing Home, Dassel, MN

Transcribed by: Kimberly Johnson, July 2004

Edited by: Thomas Saylor, August 2004

Gerald Wakefield was born 28 March 1920, on a farm by Forest City, Minnesota. One of three boys, he attended country school through eighth grade, and then graduated from Litchfield High School in 1940.

In August 1940, Gerald volunteered for the US Army, and was assigned to the Coast Artillery. In December 1941 he was serving with the 59th Coast Artillery in the Philippine Islands, on the island of Corregidor, when the United States became involved in the Pacific War.

Gerald was among the thousands of US troops that surrendered to the Japanese on Corregidor in May 1942. He spent the remainder of the war, until August 1945, as a POW of the Japanese.

Gerald's POW locations (corroborated by primary sources and other POW accounts)

92nd Garage, on Corregidor, May 1942

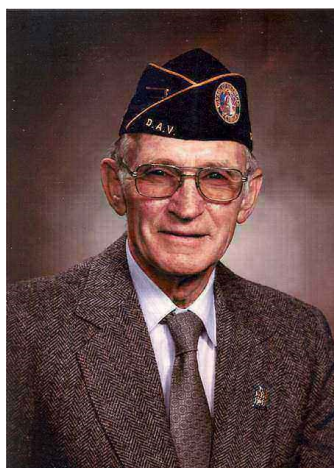
Bilibid Prison, Manila, June 1942

Palawan Island, Philippines, July 1942 – December 1944

Freighters *Oryoku Maru* and *Brazil Maru*, POW transport to Japan, December 1944 – January 1945

Near Kobe, Japan, February – August 1945

US forces evacuated POWs from Japan at war's end. Gerald then spent several months recovering from his years as a POW, and was not discharged from the Army until April 1946. Again a civilian, Gerald returned to Litchfield, Minnesota, got married in 1947 (wife Donna), and was largely self-employed. He died 1 April 2007.



Interview key:

T = Thomas Saylor

G = Gerald Wakefield

[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation

(*) = words or phrase unclear**

NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

T: Today is July 20, 2004, and this is an interview for the Prisoner of War Oral History Project. My name is Thomas Saylor. Today I'm speaking with Mr. Gerald Wakefield, at his residence here in Dassel, Minnesota. First, Mr. Wakefield, on the record, thanks very much for taking time to speak with me today.

G: That's all right.

T: For the record, you were born on 28 March 1920, on a farm by Forest City, Minnesota, that's in Meeker County. You grew up in a family of two brothers and no sisters. You attended country school through eighth grade, and then graduated from Litchfield High School in 1940. In August 1940 you volunteered for the US Army, and were in the Coast Artillery. You served in the Army until April 1946, when you were discharged. In 1941 you were serving with the 59th Coast Artillery unit in the Philippine Islands, on the island of Corregidor, when the United States became involved in the Pacific War.

G: That's right.

T: To begin, I'm wondering how you remember about December 8, 1941, as the war became real for you, and everyone there on Corregidor.

G: Well, I can remember the first day. They hit us the same day they hit Hawaii. I can remember that. From then on they hit us all the time.

T: For you, and the men around you, in the months before December did you feel war something that was coming, or were you surprised when the Japanese attack came?

G: We knew war was coming, because we lived there, and we just, we just knew it. It wasn't a great surprise.

T: How did your job, as a member of the Coast Artillery, how did it change once the war began?

G: We all became infantry.

T: Corregidor held out until May 1942, until the garrison was surrendered. On 6 May, 1942, and became a prisoner of the Japanese.

G: That's right. The Japanese were right in front of us.

T: What kind of people did you imagine the Japanese to be? I mean, what had you learned about them before that time?

G: I don't know. I never really gave it a thought before that.

T: At the time the surrender order came, do you remember yourself being nervous or fearful about what was going to happen next?

G: I don't think there was any time to feel nervous or fearful. I never thought of that. We surrendered. That's all I knew.

T: So the events kind of carried you along, it sounds like.

G: Right. Right.

T: When you were first captured, were you questioned or searched in any way?

G: They made us take our clothes off, down to nothing. Then we put our clothes back on.

T: You were at the 92nd Garage there on Corregidor, for twelve days according to a record of your service time. What do you recall about the conditions there?

G: As well as I can remember, it was full of people, all looking for food. That's what it amounted to. You lived from day to day. They never gave us no food, we had to go out and look for it. They let us go look for food.

T: You could go out and scrounge what you could?

G: Yes, that's right. Food became the main object.

T: Was there mistreatment of the POWs by the Japanese?

G: Terrible. Plenty of mistreatment. The worst was a slap. They used to slap you in the face, there [on the cheekbone area]. On the side of the face. Later on, we took it because our troops were whipping them. That was later in the war. It wasn't always clear why they did things. Their way was different than ours.

T: On Corregidor, were you mistreated?

G: I got hit in the back. They hit me with a rifle. That bothered me after the war, too. It bothered me if I lifted stuff, or carried stuff. It still bothers me now *(laughs)*. Of course, I don't let it bother me!

T: Now, you weren't questioned there on Corregidor when you were first captured?

G: No. No.

T: From the 92nd Garage there on Corregidor you were on a barge to Manila, and then spent several days there in Manila at Bilibid Prison.

G: We did, yes.

T: And then, according to your service record, you were a month at Cabanatuan, on Luzon.

G: Right.

T: Then from July 1942 until December 1944 you were on the Palawan, almost two and a half years.

G: That's right.

T: At Palawan, was the POW group Americans?

G: Americans.

T: What kind of barracks did they have there at Palawan?

G: A building, one story, open on the sides, the whole thing was open. Like a roof. A long building, I think maybe two hundred men in there. Open. We slept on the floor, just on the floor [without any mats]. It was a wooden floor.

T: What did the Japanese supply for food, as you remember it?

G: We had rice, three times a day. Like a mess kit full, for a meal.

T: Could you acquire, or scrounge, other food or things to supplement that rice?

G: It was pretty hard, because everybody was looking for it. I should say, though, that we didn't steal from one another. I'll say that.

T: So even with food in very short supply, from your memory men didn't steal from one another.

G: No, they didn't steal.

T: On Palawan, did you have a friend, or friends, people you were close to?

G: Eugene Nielsen, he was my closest buddy. I had other friends, too. Eugene Nielsen swam the bay to get away when [in December 1944] the Japanese killed [the 150 prisoners then remaining on the island]. They threw gas in a ditch where the men were, burned them alive. By that time I wasn't there anymore. [Mr. Wakefield was with the group of approximately 150 POWs removed from Palawan in September 1944, and taken to Manila].

T: How can friends help each other in a situation like the one you were in?

G: We talked. About home, what we had done, what we were going to do when we got out. Stuff like that.

T: What about your situation as a POW? Talk about that?

G: We never talked about it. We talked about something else. We knew we were going to get out.

T: As months and years dragged on, was it difficult to stay optimistic about getting out?

G: No. No. We still knew we were going to get out. Eventually. We didn't know how, but... There was guys that kind of lost their mind being pessimistic, but as a whole, it all turned out good.

T: What about the work details there at Palawan?

G: We worked, sometimes seven days a week. On the airfields. Most of the work was airfield construction. I'd say almost all of it.

T: What specifically were you doing?

G: We were building airfields. Cut the trees down out of the jungle, big enough for an airfield. Mixing cement, wheeling the cement. And everything was by hand, it wasn't machines. We didn't have any machines, it was all hand work. We cut down enough [trees] on one side of the road for one airfield, and on the other side of the road for an airfield. We did it with a handsaw. All of it with hand work.

And it was hot. They talk about how hot it is here [today in Dassel, about ninety degrees Fahrenheit], well hell, we worked in this stuff all the time. And it was humid, too.

T: Did everyone go out on details, every day?

G: Everybody that could [went out on work details, every day]. They had a couple, three guys that cooked the rice, they stayed in. But the rest would go out.

T: Do you remember a day off during the week?

G: Yes. I remember [we had] Sunday off. They didn't work us every Sunday, but we did work on Sunday many times.

T: Monday through Saturday were all work days?

G: Right.

T: When you had a day without work, what did you typically do?

G: They left us alone.

T: You could do what you wanted?

G: Well, you had no way of doing anything, because you were locked up (*laughs*). But with a day off, I slept if I could. I can't remember doing anything else.

T: Did men ever talk about trying to escape?

G: No, they didn't. They just didn't [ever talk about trying to escape]. They knew that we'd be shot if they did.

T: So the Japanese plan to shoot ten men for every man who escaped really was a deterrent.

G: That's absolutely right. It was no trouble, you could have got away easy enough, but you would have left all them people behind. We had one guy who watched his brother get shot, he was on a different detail. But that was someplace else.

Now one time we had a prisoner who got away. Street was his name. He snuck out to get some fruit, and he got lost. He just got lost. But for the Japanese, he had escaped. They were going to shoot the other nine of us [from the group of ten]. I was one of the ten, they put us in jail at night. The day we were going to be shot, they found him. That's a hell of a feeling. We figured for sure we were going to get it, but they opened up the damn door the next day and let us go. If he had got away... That was the closest I've been to...

T: Now, on the table here you have your canteen from your POW time.

G: I had that [canteen] the entire time. The engraving, I done that while I was a prisoner. If you had a canteen, it saved your life. Water. There was plenty of water at Palawan. What I'm talking about is on the boats [the *Oryoku Maru* and *Brazil Maru*]. Boy, that was important. **Moved this section below, for HS part.**

T: What about the guards at Palawan?

G: Some of them were pretty mean. Some were different than others, put it that way. Every one of them was mean, every one would have killed you, in a second, if they had a chance. You see, [by 1944] our troops were coming up, and they knew it.

T: What about the treatment of prisoners at Palawan? Were the Japanese abusive?

G: Yes, they were.

T: Now as the war went worse for the Japanese, did their treatment of you POWs change?

G: Their treatment changed terrifically, quite a bit. It got worse.

T: What could you POWs know about how the war was going?

G: We could understand Japanese talk pretty good. We got our dope from them. We heard the Japanese talking. They didn't think we understood it.

End of Side A.

T: If the Japanese lost the war, did you worry that they would kill you POWs?

G: Well, no. We didn't worry about it; we just knew it. They were going to kill us. Tojo put out an order to kill us all, to kill all the prisoners, but they didn't do it.

T: Did the Japanese tell you that they were going to kill you?

G: Yes. Yes.

T: How do you deal with that, knowing that?

G: You get hardened to it. You just do. Nothing bothers you.

T: Did it get to that point for you, where you could deal with that?

G: I thought I could. I didn't worry about nothing. I mean, what was the use of worrying, that was a foolish thing to do.

T: Let me ask about something else. Were you a religious person when you were in service, were a POW?

G: No more than the average person.

T: Do you feel that religion, or faith, helped you in any way to get through everything?

G: When I was in prison, I never looked at religion, ever.

T: Other guys? Did you see others relying on religion?

G: Very few. Very few.

T: In late 1944 you were among that group of Palawan POWs selected for transport to Japan. How was that selection made, of who went and who did not?

G: All I know is, "You go here, you go there," and that was it.

T: Did you feel good about leaving Palawan, or not?

G: Well, I was neutral [to leaving Palawan or not]. Neither way bothered me. I knew they were all bad, so why wish for one or the other. At the time, I didn't see staying or going as any better than the other.

T: The next thing I want to ask about is the ships, the *Oryoku Maru* and the *Brazil Maru*, the ships that transported you to Japan in December 1944 and January 1945.

G: That's right.

T: The *Oryoku Maru* was first. You and the other men were loaded there at Manila harbor, at Pier Seven. There were three holds. Talk about the conditions in the hold of that ship that you were in.

G: *(pauses five seconds)* It's kind of blank. I probably didn't want to remember it, and can't remember it. Kind of blank. But the conditions were terrible. I can't say it; I don't know how to say it.

T: Recall as much as you can.

G: We went down in the hold. We lined up, one man in front of you, another in back. There was no room. We were packed in tight. I had my canteen with me, and that's about it. And I had on a pair of shorts.

[I had that [canteen] the entire time. The engraving, I done that while I was a prisoner. If you had a canteen, it saved your life. Water. On the boats [the *Oryoku Maru* and *Brazil Maru*]. Boy, that was important.]

T: The ship sat for a number of days in Manila harbor before it got underway. How were the conditions below?

G: Well, I think people were kind of nuts. There was a lot of hollering, that's about what it amounted to.

T: Sounds like some guys may have been handling that better than others.

G: Oh yes. Very much.

T: How much was the heat a problem in the hold?

G: It [the heat] was a great problem. It was so hot.

T: When the ship got underway, on 14 December 1944, were you, or other men, concerned that the ship might be attacked by American planes or submarines?

G: I never thought about it. I don't know anyone who did, either.

T: So when the air attacks did come, you felt surprised.

G: Yes.

T: Men died in those holds.

G: Yes, very much. Some of them could take the conditions, and some of them couldn't. That's about what it amounted to. Those that were weak, they didn't stand a chance.

T: Planes from the American aircraft carrier *Hornet* bombed the *Oryoku Maru*, and the ship started to sink. What do you remember about the bombing, and having to get off the ship?

G: I went up topside, I crawled up a ladder, and jumped over into the water. I swam to shore.

T: Do you remember the Japanese shooting out from shore at the prisoners as you headed for shore?

G: Yes, very well. Just like an invasion, being shot at. The shooting was definitely close to me. See, they were on shore, and they had free shot. I was lucky to make it.

T: When you and the other men got to shore, what happened to you?

G: They took us to a place, all of us, they took us to a concrete, paved place [it was a tennis court]. There was a fence around it. I don't remember any food or water. After a few days we took a train someplace [to the city of San Fernando].

T: Then the record says prisoners were marched to the beach and loaded on ships.

G: Yes. But I don't remember much about it. I can't remember.

T: On memory, did you have a better memory about things after the war? That you could talk about things then?

G: Well you know, I never talked about it. I never did.

T: Let me follow up on that. When you back to the States in 1945, and saw your folks and your brothers, how much did they ask you about your POW experience?

G: They didn't ask.

T: Did you tell them?

G: I told a little bit. I didn't tell them much. We didn't even talk about it.

T: So you saw each other, and didn't talk about it?

G: No, we didn't talk about it.

T: Was that more that they didn't ask, or that you didn't tell?

G: I told them whatever they asked, but they didn't ask very much. But as time went on, it got easier for them.

T: Before they passed away, did they ultimately ask you more and more about it?

G: Not too much.

T: So it stayed a subject that they knew about, but didn't know a lot about.

G: That's right.

T: What about your brother, who was in service in Europe?

G: Well, he didn't know any more than the rest of them.

T: Now you were married in 1947. Did your wife-to-be know that you had been a POW?

G: Yes.

T: How much did you share with her, then or even after you were married?

G: Not very much.

T: Some details, in other words, but not all?

G: You might say that.

T: And your three children—how much did they ask about your POW experience?

(B, 170)

G: Well, they asked quite a bit, and I'd tell them. I'd give them everything that I thought.

T: So if they asked you for things...

G: ...I told them.

T: Was it easy to talk to your kids about what you had been through?

G: Very easy. Nothing to it. Didn't bother me a bit.

T: Has that always been the case, that if someone asked you about what you had been through, you'd be able to have a conversation about it?

G: If they wanted.

T: Okay. Let me go back to the ships, after the *Oryoku Maru*. You were loaded on to another ship, the *Brazil Maru*. That ship took you to Japan.

G: Right.

T: On 29 January 1945 the ship docked at Moji, a port in southern Japan, on Kyushu. You spent the remainder of the war in Japan.

(B, 214)

G: That's right.

T: The record says you were first at a location near Kobe. Talk about what you remember about your time there.

G: We were in a building, it was a two-story building, but it was all wood. And then they put us to work. We went quite a way every day to go to work. At one place we worked draining a lake.

T: You were in Japan when the Pacific war ended. How did you experience that?

G: We woke up in the morning, and didn't see any Japs around. The Japs were gone. We didn't go to work that day. We were on our own; there was no one around but us prisoners. Later the Americans came to the camp. First they dropped supplies to us, dropped a lot of supplies.

T: You were evacuated from Japan, and transported back to the US. You spent time in several hospitals before being discharged.

G: I gained weight pretty good. My back wasn't in good shape, but I didn't have any operations on it.

T: Do you remember the first time you saw your folks?

G: Yes. Well, we said hello, and that was about it. We never were close, hugging and...

T: Did you have any dreams about your POW time after you got back?

G: I had a few to begin with, but after that none. They left me.

T: The last question I have is, how do you feel your POW experience changed you as a person?

G: Well, I don't think it changed me a bit.

T: So you feel that over three years as a POW essentially left you the same person you were before?

G: That's right.

T: How do you account for being able to cope so well with being a POW all those years?

G: Well, you've got to have a little gumption. I never let it bother me. You've got to keep a level head.

T: That's the last question I have. Anything you'd like to add?

G: Nope.

T: Well, thank you very much for talking with me today.

G: I've done the best I could.

END OF INTERVIEW